

Collapsing Time, Chaotic Consciousness: Reading Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* from the Perspective of Postmodern Gothic

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ABSTRACT. The intense concerns with time, space and consciousness structure modernist and postmodernist Gothic narratives with the elements been treated much differently in these periods from the previous ages, owing to the hypotheses of great twentieth and twenty first century philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, later to be followed by Gilles Deleuze, for whom the linear spatialized concept of time and the traditional notions of space and consciousness are no more than ideal speculations and to whom the existential views of time, space and consciousness make reasonable substitutes.

Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* is among the postmodern works which touch upon philosophical contemplations on metaphysical dilemmas such as the meaning of true life, ultimate consciousness, unanimity of perception and reality, and extraterrestrial concepts of time and space. It is set in a traumatized present, outside of history while the very absence of future and the grip of the past it represents as well as the melancholy stasis it imposes become at once sources of revelation and triggers for a sense of uncanny to evoke. The reflections of irregular movements of time, space and memory as well as their constant "becoming" in postmodern Gothic can be used in suggestive assemblage with Gilles Deleuze's philosophical ones. It seems that the filmic desert wherein most of the narration takes place is ineluctably haunted by the Gothic spirit of *Psycho*, a terror-inspiring film with which it shares a number of images and incidents. However, it is the Deleuzian essences of time and space that most contribute to *Point Omega*'s Gothic texture.

By dissolving the two texts, *Point Omega* and *Psycho*, into each other and constituting a labyrinthine network of Gothicized associations and affinities, DeLillo has presented a magnificent work within the tradition of postmodern Gothic, which exceeds in both intellect and percipience from most of his contemporary novels'. Like the unnatural slowed-down time and space it presents, *Point Omega* demands a slow and conscientious reading while at the same time promising new ideas and revelations to the critics and scholars each time they attempt to work on it with devoted attention and mediation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Time functions weirdly throughout postmodern fiction. Sometimes it moves fast. Sometimes it slows down or even stops. When time slows down, people and things become fragmented and stretched out as if they are pieces of a puzzle scattered in the air, each directing toward an unknown destination. But when it accelerates in speed, those scattered pieces blend into each other with no specific discipline in a way that individuals turn into objects or vice versa, leaving no true reality or identity behind.

Immensely influenced by Bergson's philosophy of time, Deleuze differentiates two types of time: "Chronos is the spatialized, measured, clock time, but Aeon, as duration itself, is virtual. It is a transpersonal, trans-temporal, force, driven by the élan vital of evolving life. Chronos is present-and action-oriented. Aeon is the limitless flow of past and future, in which the present is only 'the instant without thickness and without extension'. It is thus 'always already passed and eternally yet to come'" (Powell, 91). It is the second type of time, Aeon, with which the existential view of time is

primarily concerned and which is regarded as one of the special properties of modern and postmodern Gothic fiction and cinema.

Deleuze notes that people have different experiences of time. Each individual lives in a duration of time, called "*duree*", which is distinct from other durations. Time is not anymore considered as linear with past, present and future following one another in sequence; rather, it functions like a cone wherein the past, present and future are scattered everywhere, continually moving or "*becoming*" in multitudes of durations. There is no "*present*" in real sense; neither is "*past or future*". In circular movements the present "*becomes past*" and the future "*becomes present*" instant by instant. "*Now*" is only a contracted point where the near past and near future meet and mingle.

Opposite to the linear conception of time which gives privilege to the present as the only point of time that actually exists, for an existential point of view there would be no present if it were not for the gravity of the past and the weight of the future to characterize it. "Time, considered intensively, is therefore different at each of its moments, and cannot be considered as an accumulation of points or 'nows' that are simply added on to each other. At any moment in time one could either recalls the virtual past, or imagines the virtual future – so that one's present is merely a concentrated point of an infinite and virtual open whole of time" (Colebrook, 22).

Based on this theory, minds and memories are not the same through time. They continually change or "*become*", as they go through the flows of durations at each point of time. Each consciousness has its own perception of the world, different from others'. One's memories of the past and at the same time the goals and aspirations he places before himself determine how he perceives this world in the present. For Bergson, "in order to *endure*, the consciousness is not entirely absorbed in each moment as it passes, but maintains an awareness of former states at some level. Time passes, but also time continues. This memory enables the ego to experience the quality of its full, living, potential of pure heterogeneity" (Bergson, 104). Memory, in its multiple durations, constantly brings the events and experiences of the past back into the present consciousness and empowers the past to dominate the present.

Consciousness sometimes delays or slows down, rendering the duration of mind to be contracted and the past be carried in to present; an smell, a photo, an alley, or a piece of music can drive a person back into his past for hours, hindering his present to move on or his future to come. One single day can have the weight of a month or pass in a blink in a minute. One whose past carries more weight than the present or the future, according to Todd May, suffers from a psychological illness, "a lived time that does not stop orienting itself toward the future but deforms that future in order to make it a repetition of the past" (43). He abandons the present in order to recover the past not allowing the future to happen to him.

In addition to the static time experienced by mentally ill person, there is another form of manifestation of time in modern and postmodern works: travels in durations, commonly called and known as "*time-travelling*"; it is a familiar theme firmly rooted in the Gothic tradition of vampirism. "Gothic has long been regarded as a genre of sensation", suggests Powell, "and Deleuze proposes a logic, and language, of sensation" (87). For her, Gothic is a way of thinking through aesthetic affects rather than through concepts as philosophy does. To think of time, memory and durations through sensation is to approach Deleuzian-time-theory from a Gothic perspective.

Gothic cinema, likewise, considers certain privileges for subjects of time and memory by which the Gothic film images assert their potent effects on the audience. These types of films usually foreground characters who are either obsessed with their traumatic past, the effects of which situate their present into a state of mental illness, anguish and distress or those like vampires whose immortality questions the nature of time and place while rendering them to totally abandon the norms and principles of being human, living in a brutal immense and timeless cosmos, lost and confused.

Durations are likely to stop temporarily or even forever in the state of mental breakdown or psychological disturbance:

Visceral shocks, and states of extreme suspense and terror, also serve to take us 'out of time' and offer a more contemplative form of cinematic experience. In the Gothic, this is a source of atrophy rather than perpetual motion: the haunted house is a psychic museum of frozen time that refuses to progress. The dead step out of space-time and into duration. Death splits time, and the dead are plummeted from the present into a permanent state of past time, accessible only by memory, whether of place or person sensitive to its vibrations (Powell, 92).

The Gothic treatment of time and memory, however, is not exclusively bound to the Gothic fictional and cinematic productions. There are manifold apparently non-Gothic works such as William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, in which time, space and memory deviate from the normal traditional trajectory demanding new perspectives and challenges from the audiences in order to be perceived; nevertheless, these works, too, go under the category of postmodern Gothic for it claims almost any kind of abnormalities, deviations and deformities.

Space, in contemporary Gothic is an uncanny space or as Catherine Spooner calls it, a "space of absence", "space without identity", where, "even within apparently easy reach of civilization, one could disappear without trace" (48). The empty implacable land with its vastness and loneliness becomes a source of terror for which there is no reasonable excuse. Disappearance in the spaces that are not places is among the most disturbing occurrences in the over-populated western world which "confound the logic of narrative, as they defeat Closure" (Spooner, 48-49). Thus the space, along with time and mind, assumes a Gothic quality which, despite of its bizarreness and unconventionality, is familiar to a postmodern audience.

Point Omega (2010), DeLillo's latest offering, is a spare short novel, 148 pages only, which has gone widely unrecognized and unappreciated compared to his previous controversial novels such as *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*. Except for two or three short essays, there is no other critical book or articles written on this novel. The reason for this neglect is likely to be the writer's deviation in this novel from his familiar course of writing, both in style and content. Nothing like the airborne toxic event of *White Noise* happens here; nor the political uproar of *Libra* or the flow of capital on global financial market running through *Cosmopolis* or the violent terrorism of *Falling Man*. It is a flat silky novel of smooth narration and fluent tone addressing primarily philosophical ideas regarding identical essences of perception and reality, human relationship, and time and space.

On a surface level, it may seem that there exists no logical or sensible link between *Point Omega* and the movie *Psycho* outside the territory of the book. The strong parallel between the two texts, the novel and the movie, becomes comprehensible when the attention falls on the genre, Gothic, in which both thrive. However, the novel makes a less direct attachment to gothic aura than the movie does. Its venture merely takes place in two environments: a weird, gloomy exhibition and a bare desert in which time and space operate strangely different from those of the city-life. Though apparently not gothic, both of the novel's settings leave a peculiar impact, similar to that of gothic, not only on the characters involved, but also on the readers. *Psycho*, on the other hand easily makes contact with classical gothic. Though the two texts are not similar on the surface, there is a strong underlying connection between them that needs to be uncovered.

The novel is set in 2006 and is framed in six chapters opening and closing with chapters titled as Anonymity and Anonymity 2 set in real-life Museum of Modern Art in New York (2006), wherein Douglas Gordon's heavily slowed-down, two frames per second, screening of Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Psycho* (1960) was exhibited. The video installation was famously called *24-Hour Psycho*. The novel begins and ends depicting an anonymous spectator standing still next to the wall in the art gallery, attentively watching the screen.

The setting of four middle chapters, however, shifts to a worn-out house in a vast spacious desert in California. The house is owned by Richard Elster, a 73-year-old defense intellectual who has spent a few years collaborating with Iraq war planners at the Pentagon. He has retreated in self-

exile from the "News and Traffics" and "Sports and Weathers" of city life into a no man's land seeking transcendence and true life from the immenseness and loneliness of the landscape (*Point*, 23): "The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever", Elster thinks, "the true life takes place when we're alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments" (*Point*, 21). He has left his life, work and family in the city, having no plan for a return. "He'd exchanged all that for space and time" (*Point*, 24). He is already joined by Jim Finley, a young filmmaker in his mid-30s who has pursued Elster into the desert hoping to make a documentary of his experiences as a conceptualizer in the Pentagon in one long take. Elster's daughter, who is revealed to be escaping from a mad boyfriend, also joins them midway through the book.

For Elster, everything is different in the desert, "out beyond cities and scattered towns" (*Point*, 22) wherein days begin by conflict, "every step [one] takes on a city street is conflict, other people are conflict" (*Point*, 29). Desert offers a space in which all the things one has to do are "to eat, sleep and sweat, here to do nothing, sit and think" (*Point*, 22). No responsibility, no worry, no obligation or restraint. To Elster the city is saturated with complications and turbulences which constantly threaten the elevated thoughts and pure imaginations. None of those complications happens in the desert; a beautifully evoked landscape wherein the simple act of talking bears on a precipitous epiphany.

The solitary spectator of the opening and closing sections, declares Jacob Watson in his essay, "Don DeLillo and TV Buddha", "clearly represents the filmic way of experiencing the world, considering the way he models his mode of conscious awareness after an exhibit of 'pure film, pure time'" (28). As Watson notes, the exhibit emerges as an object of contemplation, a stimulus for the viewers to alter their consciousness in order to gain an awareness of "the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing" (*Point*, 17). *24 Hour Psycho*'s "merciless pacing" of the film, with no soundtrack at all, demands a "corresponding watchfulness" which is the ultimate point and purpose of the exhibit; a watchfulness that alters consciousness for the time being, or perhaps forever (Watson, 27-28).

The intense attention of the anonymous spectator, standing in the darkness hidden from other's view, is not distracted by people's comings and goings. He has been in the art gallery for several straight days keeping the same position all the time: "back at the wall, in the dark, motionless" (*Point*, 8). Extremely infatuated by the film - slowed down to a grueling 24-hour runtime- he moves "a hand toward his face, repeating, ever so slowly, the action of a figure on the screen" (*Point*, 4). The figure on the screen is Anthony Perkins, starring in *Psycho* as the psychotic Norman Bates, whose single act of turning head is, for example, fragmented into several "incremental movements rather than one continuous motion" (*Point*, 4-5). Gradually he loses interest in the mundane life outside the gallery permitting his altered consciousness to assume a new identity conceived and developed through unnatural visual experiences; at last, "the man separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates" (*Point*, 148).

Opposite to what Jacob Watson asserts, however, Elster's daughter, Jessica, does not operate on a different timescale from the other three main characters. The fact that every one of them has time-durations of their own is irrefutable but strangely they succeed to cope with their present environments' durations. The claustrophobic space of the art gallery makes an obvious contrast to the land's spaciousness of the middle sections, though time operates in slow motion in both settings. In the art gallery as well as in the land, time slows down. Time becomes spacious and space becomes timeless. As Elster indicates, time passes differently in the land. He notes: "time slows down when I'm here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than see it. I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour. I don't get old here" (*Point*, 30). As Elster mediates, time falls away in the desert. For the old man, in landscape "day turns to night eventually but it is only a matter of light and darkness, it's not time passing, mortal time. There's none of the usual terror. It's different here, time is enormous, that's what I feel here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us" (*Point*, 56).

Whereas Finley shares Elster's attitude toward the distinctive nature of the land's time and space, for Jessica there is nothing unique in the land which makes it superior to the city. The young filmmaker is apparently so accustomed to the composure of his present utopia that he has abandoned his cell phone and laptop for the time being since "they began to seem feeble, whatever their speed and reach, devices overwhelmed by landscape" (*Point*, 82). However, to Jessica who tries to read science fiction, "nothing she'd read so far could begin to match ordinary life on this planet [...] for sheer unimaginableness" (*Point*, 82). The more she tries to adjust to the exotic environment of the land and odd behaviors of her companions, the less she succeeds; an undesirable experience which eventually leads to her permanent disappearance.

All characters belong to the city. They have grown up and lived in cities where time, in contrast to the expansive time of the desert, is compressed taking the form of a "minute-to-minute reckoning" (*Point*, 56). City, wherein time accelerates, functions as the only counterpoint to the enormous time-space narrative of the desert. To live in a city is to harmonize with the speed of dashing transportation vehicles and fleeting electronic devices without which the life is almost impossible. According to Elster:

It's all embedded, the hours and minutes, words and numbers everywhere [...] train stations, bus routes, taxi meters, surveillance cameras. It's all about time, dimwit time, inferior time, people checking watches and other devices, other reminders. This is time draining out of our lives. Cities were built to measure time, to remove time from nature. There's an endless counting down [...] when you strip away all the surfaces, when you see into it, what's left is terror (*Point*, 56-57).

Gothic metropolis with its labyrinthine streets twisted into one another, dark underpasses and filthy quandaries is the embodiment of the traditional Gothic colossal mansions with mysterious passages and soaring towers in which heroes and heroines were confined and maltreated. Early Gothic chose lonely and dangerous rural regions for their settings as counterpoints to the safety of urban civilization. From the mid-nineteenth century and the ceaseless growth of population, however, Gothic novels abandoned rural landscapes in favor of monstrous metropolises in which the adventurous enterprises and criminal schemes thrive, ripen and end up with catastrophes. These novels have been referred to as Urban Gothic since the late twentieth century.

None of *Point Omega*'s settings, however, are located in the wild rural districts, like Radcliff's *The Romance of the Forest*, or in the treacherous streets of the Gothic metropolises, as in the Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*. While the art gallery is set in a metropolis, it is completely detached from it as if being located in another planet, somewhere beyond any corporeal concern. Likewise, the desert is a neutral zone wherein the gravities from distant cities on the one side and the mountainous areas on the other side are counteracted and eradicated. Nevertheless, the enormity of the bare land itself becomes a source of terror. There are "no mornings or afternoons [but] one seamless day, every day until the sun begins to arc and fade, mountains emerging from their silhouettes" (*Point*, 46). The time is dead, leaving the characters to their "sense of self-entrapment" (*Point*, 46). Night rushes in while it is "dead still in the room, in the house, everywhere out there, widows open, nothing but night" (*Point*, 39).

DeLillo in this short novel contributes not only to Deleuze's time-space philosophy but also to the philosophical and religious hypothesis of the French Jesuit and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) regarding the ultimate level of consciousness which he calls "Omega Point". As Harald Kleeman clarifies in his book, *Point Omega, The Singularity at the End of Time* (2001), Point Omega is "the point of origin and of return in the cosmic cycle, and the ultimate point of reference for every conceivable frame of mind" (44). "Following the stream of consciousness all the way to the supernal spring", continues Kleemann, "we reach the omnipresent point, which is present in every atom and at the core of every star, yet beyond duality and essentially above and beyond the mind-space-time universe. It is Point Omega, the secret of creation and the open-

ended universe. Consciousness is the open window into eternal life, infinite sources of energy and information" (529).

Omega Point is the "atomic" and "omnipresent unit of consciousness" which is not only the destiny and aim of the whole lives but also the source of all information and energy, the Alpha or Aleph, by which an infinite series of new and possible worlds is likely to come into existence (Kleeman, 530). It is a magical consciousness freed from all restraints and impediments, a consciousness which is one with the universe and at the same time above and beyond it. For Omega Point to be released from every limitations and constraints does not exclude the boundary of time and space; it happens beyond history where time and space do not exist and have no significances. Consciousness is all that matters. Teilhard de Chardin's speculation comprises, to summarize it, "the superluminal indeed instantaneous connection between all events in mind, space, and time in the experience of the eternal present, Point Omega, the singularity beyond the phenomenal universe" (Kleeman, 558); an ultimate point of consciousness toward which the universe is evolving.

Choosing Teilhard's philosophical term for the title of his novel, DeLillo also lets Elster, one of his main characters interpret the theory of Omega Point according to his own experiences and beliefs throughout the book. For Elster, who has read Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* in which the case theory is being argued, Point Omega means that "human thought is alive, it circulates. And the sphere of collective human thought, this is approaching the final term, the last flare" (*Point*, 65). He defines it through two forms of paroxysm: "Either a sublime transformation of mind and soul or some worldly convulsion. We want it to happen" (*Point*, 91). As the time goes on, the old man explains, "consciousness accumulates. It begins to reflect upon itself" rendering mathematics to the mind, some unknown law of mathematics or physics in which the mind "transcends all direction inward" (*Point*, 91).

24-Hour Psycho exhibition too with its "stillborn images" and "collapsing time" is conducive to the speculations on Teilhard's theory" (*Point*, 78). To Elster, to watch the intensely slowed down film is "like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion year" (*Point*, 59). For a man like him who "thinks on a cosmic scale", as did Teilhard, the compressed time and space of the exhibit as well as the desert's stretched ones resembles the contraction and protraction of universe (*Point*, 59). Like time, consciousness assumes a new form throughout the novel; it becomes a thing of atomic fragments, flares of perceptions and abrupt epiphanies.

For the psychotic, as with Norman Bates, time does not go on; the past accumulates while the future is nothing more than the constant confrontations with presents squeezed by smashing burdens of the past. The flows of time stopped in Bates' house as well as in the uninhabited motel since the time he murdered her mother. The world is condensed for Bates in these two Gothic places which are located, as with *Point Omega*'s main setting, somewhere remote and hardly accessible in California City. His being compared, by some critics, to a stuffed owl arrested mid-flight in the film represents his self-imprisonment in the house far from the reach of any human relationship as well as his final confinement by mental institutions.

2. CONCLUSION

What distinguish postmodern Gothic for the most part are the prominences of location and time; however, they both become inconsistent, disintegrated and denatured. Places lose their stability, evolving into fluid spaces for which there are no definite identities. "What we find in the numerous conjunctions of Gothic and the postmodern", suggest David Punter and Glennis Byron, "is a certain sliding of location, a series of transfers and translocations from one place to another, so that our sense of the stability of the map is – as indeed it has been since the first fantasy of a Gothic castle – forever under siege, guaranteed to us only by manuscripts whose own provenance and completeness are deeply uncertain" (*Point*, 59).

We have emerged into a world where someone or something is not located at a single place in a single time. An individual, in a virtual world, may be occupying many different locations while assuming many different scenes at the same time, one bodily scene, but others pertaining to his/her

Gothic apparition, which challenge the idea of conventional appearance. This is what Spooner and McEvoy call "the uncanny awareness of multiplicity" (133). The development of the placeless and directory-less mobile phones and the prevalence of worldwide webs have eradicated the very certainty that the individual with whom one is communicating attends in a single place and time, which cause an "uncanny of virtual locality" (Spooner, 2007:133); a locale in which the individual's sense of physical shape is dissolved since he can determine in which guise he wants to appear. As a result the bodies become rigidly supernatural, the "engineered ghosts of our physical selves [...]" just as, for those who can afford it, the body itself becomes uncannily pliable, an enactment of a stance towards the world as much as an efflorescence of the body with, or into, which we may have been born" (Spooner, 2007:133). It leads to a "morphological uncanny" which concurs with the other two versions of the uncanny (Spooner, 2007:133).

As a long-standing and well-known genre, Gothic also foregrounds the concepts of time and memory, the two of which, along with location and stimuli, become gothicized in postmodern version of this genre. A Deleuzian time, as Colebrook illustrates, is a time which "is 'out of joint' or 'time in its pure state', where a memory may flood in, or a perception might occur, such that the present is deprived of its sense and continuity" (27). For Deleuze, "plot, or the future as the resolution and achievement of the past, is undone in favor of an inhuman time, a time that disturbs habit, for we perceive time not as it is for us - a general, recognized and functioning humanity - but time as a potential for difference" (Colebrook, 27). The chronological time of pre-modernist novels turns into a crack in modern and postmodern works; a time that does not move simply from one point to another but which breaks the integrity and prevents the enveloping wholeness.

Postmodern Gothic has emerged more as a constantly "becoming" and evolutionary theme rather than a specific genre with exclusive features. Most of the works that can be labeled as New Gothic present real lives, looking from various and each time new dimensions, and strictly reject being reduced to the traditional Gothic stereotypes such as brutal scenes, demonic heroes and innocent heroines.

According to Jacob Watson, "in direct contrast to the temporal compression and perceptual narrowing of televisual consciousness, film is associated in DeLillo's novels with the expansion of time and the dissolution of focus" and it refers to the fact that "historically, the technology of film has its origins in the scientific desire to protract and dissect time. A rapidly captured sequence of images can take a galloping horse and slow it down for the purpose of analysis without altering its motions" (24-26). *24-hour Psycho* was a Deleuzian "active force", going to the limits of what it was capable of. The producer, Douglas Gordon, explored to see what else cinema might incorporate that it had not displayed before. By stretching the timeline of the movie from the original 109 minutes to twenty four hours, he intended to actualize the virtual of the cinema, in Deleuzian terms, through the medium of time. What DeLillo drew from visiting the exhibition, however, was a novel idea for a book in which the exhibition itself appeared as a province of horror.

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